

HOW TO RECOVER FROM THE MALNOURISHMENT OF SUCCESS ©

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I. Introduction:

Unless something is wrong with our faculties, we relish in the experience of individual and social achievements. The experience of great accomplishments, especially noble ones, can generate a beautiful sense of personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and rest; we find achievement. We value success and are relieved when our goals are realized. Our ability to work through certain problems, combined with our accomplishments, can become a source of legitimate or proper pride.

Sadly, many of us are not able to meet our goals. Even though our failure to achieve our goals may be multifaceted, the intoxicating effects from false pleasures, distractions, an impulsive disposition, an imagination that neglects reality, a victimization mindset that comes from experiencing failure, and the demand to receive rather than earn success, keep us from achieving success.

But even with those who achieve success, I have observed that many of them suffer from qualitative malnourishment. These successful people so focused their attention on the future goal that they failed to perceive, appreciate, grow, and relish in "the now." Thus, upon meeting their long-term goals, they found themselves qualitatively "starved." In fact, the cost for success was so great that only after they achieved success did some of them realize they lost too much in the process: the presence of family, the cultivation of genuine friendships, a life beautifully well lived, and a wide and rich array of enriching experiences. Success can be very lonely. Because they alienated the richest sources of nourishment (e.g., family intimacy), some successful people have developed an appetite for the cheap and vulgar (e.g., certain chat rooms).

Let us take a brief but closer look at why we all too often fail to reach our goals. This will not only identify possible areas in our own lives, but will also help us better understand the "landmines" we should avoid. Afterwards, we will consider seven steps one needs to take in order to recover from or prevent malnourishment. Three concluding thoughts will follow.

II. Six Reasons for Failing to Achieve Success:

First, the problem of false pleasures. Some of us are intoxicated by false pleasures. In fact, I contend that the indulgence into false pleasures is the most obvious reason why so many of us are not able to achieve our goals. False pleasures are those activities that take us away from making our life count for something great. Why? False pleasures are illicit or illegitimate pleasures that fall outside of God's purposes. While false pleasures offer much, they extract from us our best

resources, skills, and dreams (e.g., adultery). On the other hand, true pleasures are those activities that align one's will with God's will. For example, meeting the practical needs of others, enjoying intimacy with marriage, genuinely loving others, and serving our community with greatness are all true pleasures. But when we embrace false pleasures, as exemplified in Oscar Wilde's infamous character, Dorian Gray's quest for pleasure or Gollum's lust for the ring of power in J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, we become our own worst enemies. False pleasure changes us into broken people with ruined lives (e.g., alcohol abuse; pornography). Sadly, the pain does end with ourselves but strikes the hearts of those who love us dearly.

As a result of the intoxication of false pleasures, our goals become like white clouds high in the sky; they are forever out of reach. Because these false pleasures have cultivated a lust for them, developing into appetites and habits, we have become lost in an obscure fog, a stupor, a state of dissipation with no moral compass: we do not know who we are or where we are going. Though we may share our dreams with others, and our soul filled with regret in view of what we are becoming, we cannot seem to get beyond the mind-numbing concoctions of pleasure. Like Gandalf said to Frodo about Gollum's pursuit of the ring of power: "And now the Ring has drawn him [Gollum] here. He will never be rid of his need for it. He hates and loves the ring, as he hates and loves himself."

"Suppression of the obvious" and "substitution" is easier than change (Romans 1).

But recovery is possible while one has "air to breathe." As a Christian believer, it starts by receiving God's forgiveness (1 John 1:9). You must count on God's forgiveness as a fact to believe. When you ever come to doubt this biblical fact, look to the historical cross at Calvary where Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for your behalf. You have been forgiven. If the Almighty God of the universe has forgiven you, surely you can forgive yourself. See, because of God's undeserved favor upon you, you have been set free. For those who do have not experienced God's forgiveness, the key to a life of redemption, security, and both lasting joy and peace (no matter the circumstance) is to place your trust in Jesus Christ, believing that He died on the cross for your sins and rose bodily from the dead. By receiving His gift of salvation in the open arms of faith, you can truly live knowing your past is redeemed and your future is secure. By His grace you are set free. The only condition for salvation is to place your trust in Jesus Christ. Turn to Him. Receive Him now.

To be sure, receiving God's grace does not mean that you will not have to pay for the damages that have occurred from experiencing false pleasures. Nor does it mean that after receiving God's gift of salvation that you will no longer hunger for these false pleasures. Destructive appetites have developed and a scarring and marring have occurred in your life, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Like one of the leading theologians of the 20th century once said to me in a conversation regarding leadership and the spiritual life, "The sins of my youth still haunt me today but as I have walked with the Lord, they [sins] have lost their attractiveness."

But healing can begin to occur by intimately abiding in God's grace, forgiveness, and love. The more you intimately fellowship with God, in deep prayer, serious meditation of the Scriptures, genuinely worshipping God corporately, yielding to God in the details of life, and in meeting the needs of others, you will begin to live the way God has dynamically designed you; you will have this hand-in-glove sensation. His dreams become your dreams. His goals become your goals; His priorities become your priorities. As a result, you will be nourished intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, in the most dynamic way. Personal contentment will be one of God's gifts to you (Phil. 4:10-13).

Even though I contend that false pleasures are the most obvious reason why so many are unable to achieve their goals, let us now examine other contributing factors:

Second, the problem of distraction. While some short-term goals may be good, noble, and worthwhile, good goals can distract us from our reaching what is best. As a result, our limited source of energy, resources, and time are "spent," scattered like "chaff in the wind." In fact, good-term goals can become an enemy of what is best. Rather, what is needed is to focus on short-term good goals that can be integrally related or redirected to achieving our long-term goals. Connect your short-term goals with your long-term goals; do not allow yourself to become compartmentalized, divided, or torn whereby resources are not redirected toward what is best in reaching your long-term goals. Like a tree whose leaves become mulch and fertilizer for the winter, it redirects its resources in order to flourish the next spring and summer. Therefore, do not lose focus! Do not merely focus on what is good, concentrate on specific short-term goals that will help you best achieve your long-term goals. For example, when I studied for my doctoral comprehensive exams, I charted out, diagrammed, and created lessons in order to use what I am studying to become a more effective professor. I seek to reproduce whatever is worthwhile in order to make the greatest impact possible in the lives of my students.

Third, the problem of impulsiveness. Related to above, some of us have become too impulsive in the way we live our lives. We follow the changing winds with little or no serious attention given to the types of activities will help us best reach our long-term goals. We have these dreams, these goals to achieve, but we allow ourselves to become distracted by people, objects, activities, and ideas that come in and out of our lives. All too often, these "interfering" activities, while often popular and sensational, are trivial, unimportant, and malnourishing; they do not qualitatively "nourish" are disposition, inform our minds, refine our good habits, or meaningfully contribute to the control center of our personality. Sadly, because of our whimsical nature, our lives are like "driftwood," following along wherever the currents lead us. When we drift, we typically float along the path of least resistance. Aimlessly wandering along, snagging ourselves on whatever is before us. As a result, shallow thinking, small goals, and poor qualitative growth emerges. It is in adversity where acute observations, critical reflection, and creative inquiries/possibilities are best expressed. In sum, consider the words of Paul G.

Thomas: "Until input [thought] is linked to a goal (purpose) there can be no intelligent accomplishment." Therefore, stay on target!

Fourth, the problem of imagination without reality. There are those of us who most certainly aim for the top. But our goals are rooted in imagination, not reality. Without critical analysis and reflection regarding our disposition and gift-cluster, and honest discourse among those who know us best, our dreams never materialize. We overexert our imagination against reality rather than within reality. When one engages in imagination without reality it is sorta like trying to build the home of one's dreams without accounting for the physical law of gravity. Thus, our lives become broken by repeated experiences of failure. It is in the feelings of failure that bitterness finds fertile ground to grow. While we are to dream big, for it is in the imagination where creativity emerges, our imagination must be within the framework of the way things actually are.

Fifth, the problem of personal failure. Some of us have simply given up on our goals because of failure. We have tasted the experience of failure and it is too bitter for us to swallow. Failure is not only quite embarrassing, but can also be terribly painful. Even with one encounter with significant failure (e.g., failure to pass a board exam) or the growing catalogue of small failures (e.g., never hitting a home run), melancholy, depression, and even despondency can become our closest "friends." With the help of these "friends," we come to the conclusion that recovery from failure is not possible. Thus, we wallow in the black tar of self-pity. No matter how many times we are encouraged to "pick ourselves up," we ignore these "empty exhortations," "wishful thoughts," and "Pollyanna notions." In fact, we may even mock such statements and look upon those who make such claims with scorn.

And sixth, the problem of entitlement. The problem with entitlement is that we claim that it is our privilege, our right, and our prerogative to receive success. Instead of earning success, we demand that success be given to us! This indulgent notion is the plight of the "sluggard." Failing to recognize the symbiotic relationship of wisdom between earnings and labor, we do not understand the nature of success. Anything other than earnings from labor, is either grace, that is, earning something which one does not deserve, or a gift. In sum, whatever we receive is an earning, grace, or simply a gift. Though some gifts come with an obligation, it is not an entitlement (e.g., a certain birthday gift). See, "success" that is not earned is not true success, for true success is an "achievement of intention." Even if one receives a gift in response to the mindset of entitlement, one has to learn how to become successful with it or they will lose what they have received as a gift (e.g., lottery winners). It is in the working for success that one becomes skilled to maintain the success that is achieved. The problem of entitlement is that it generates chronic failure.

While "success" is not guaranteed because of our sinful propensities and eager delight in that which wounds us, the abuse of our own free will, and the direct or indirect abuse received by other people's free will, we have to learn how to live for

those precepts and activities that matters most to God. Abiding in God's will, loving Him with our utmost is where authentic meaning, meaningful purpose, and true significance are found. Hope can be rekindled out of brokenness when our attention turns to Him. One of the most powerful expressions of this truth is in the experience of Corrie Ten Boom, a Holocaust Survivor, and a Dutch-Christian, discovered, in her own experience. Moreover, Jesus Christ, who was afflicted and unjustly condemned to death the cross, rose bodily from the dead. He, who knew no sin, became sin on our behalf (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). Here is God who suffered with us so that we might be free to love Him (Phil. 2:5-11), experiencing the very best He has to offer to us, in this life, and for all eternity.

While this list is not comprehensive, explaining why people fail in reaching their long-term goals, it does help us to be mindful of those six dangerous "landmines." Remember, these "landmines" are always in our midst. Therefore, if you earnestly desire to achieve success, you must not only avoid these six areas, but you must also pursue success qualitatively, drawing both from your past and present experiences, as you abide in intimate fellowship with the God of the Bible (John 15). As seen in the account of the prodigal son, memory can be a powerful resource to move us in wise ways.

III. How to recover from the malnourishment of success?

For those who are aiming for long-term success, integrating the best of one's imagination within the construct of reality, adjusting to and learning from our mistakes, another problem is readily experienced. I suspect this problem is an epidemic but rarely examined. It is the plight of many who are successful, wreaking havoc upon them, yet largely overlooked. In some ways, this problem might even be considered the "silent slow killer." The problem is one of aesthetic malnourishment. In essence, we focus so much attention upon reaching our long-term goal (s) that we forget what is right in front of us. In other words, we can so rush off to see our dreams come true that we fail to qualitatively embrace the richness found in moment-by-moment present experiences. What I mean is that we so fix our minds upon the completion of our future plans that we fail to extract all the blessings found in present experiences. While accomplishments can definitely generate a nourishing sense of fulfillment, rest, and satisfaction, and can become a resource to reach other goals, how we get there can be quite anemic. It is like swimming on top of the Caribbean waters to reach a certain destination, going from point A to point B, without ever looking down at the coral reefs with all of its myriads of colors arrayed in splendor by our Creator. As a result, we may reach our destination, but the swim experience itself was not all that it could have been. It is like hosting your family on Christmas, but failing to enjoy their presence. The food was great, the decorations beautiful, but it was all a blur to you as you slaved in the kitchen, hurrying from one job to another to make "everything perfect." The event ends in exhaustion. Thus, the swim and the Christmas celebration simply becomes another swim and another Christmas celebration, catalogued in a file of accomplishments, without ever

standing out as intense, memorable, and unique. We may reach our goals, but we arrive in a malnourished state.

Therefore, what I am encouraging each of us to do in order to prevent or recover from anemia that can flow from success is to extract the full meaning of the present in anticipation of the future. So, how can we better engage the present experience so that the challenging path we take to reach our attainable goals, informs, nourishes, and stretches us in the most remarkable ways? Consider the following related ways: First, learn how to relish in the present without forsaking your targeted long-term goal (s). In other words, be able to pause and “drink in” the present experience. Like the deer in the forest or the rabbit in the meadow, use all your senses in the situation or setting in which you find yourself. Be all there!

Second, do not be in such a hurry that you fail to recognize that the ordinary details of life are actually extraordinary. Observing the kids who play in the park, seeing how the lady tends to her beautiful flower garden, and interacting with a bright student, who is reading a thought-provoking work, can be a genuine source of good pleasure. Aesthetic sources of pleasure are all around us! Sit back, relax, look, listen, feel, taste, and hear. Each and every day look for something new, something that will challenge you, grow you, and expand and enrich your person and inform your situation.

Third, allow the present experience to educate you. In other words, do not bypass what you can learn as you seek to reach your future goals. Learning is pleasurable. Therefore, thoughtfully observe and make intelligent inquiries. In other words, repeatedly ask yourself, “What do you see?” Look at some particular situation, idea, or object from one perspective. Then, try to look at it from another perspective. See how other objects and activities interact with the object or idea that has your attention. See how you can use these insights to reach your goal. During and afterwards, reflect upon what you have learned. Perhaps write it down for the sake of remembrance.

Fourth, engage adversity. So many of us choose to escape from rather than embrace our present circumstance. For some, we fear that we might lose what we hope to gain; we are immobilized by possible failure. But if we can take our adversities, overcome them, and translate them into meaningful resources, these former obstacles might possibly help us in reaching our goals in the most striking ways. But even failure can be an important resource for engaging adversity.

Fifth, use your past to engage your present. Think of your past lessons as resources to help you consciously engage the now. Learning from your past can help you gain the most in the now as you anticipate the future. By meaningfully engaging the present with the past, you will gain even more resources to help you prepare for the future and anticipate the unexpected. Therefore, do not forsake your past. In fact, come to terms with your past and think of it as a reservoir of resources to help you engage your present circumstance in anticipation of reaching your future goals.

Sixth, (related to number 2) closely look for connections. Do not only consider the nature of your object that has your attention but also look for relationships that interact with it. For example, if one were to study the nature of the flower, one would not merely study the roots, stems, and leaves. No, one would want to study how the soil, water, air, light, bees, and worms interact with the flower. Engage your surroundings and consider how your inquiry is affected or influenced by certain actions and movements. Know your context!

And seventh, pursue every activity with artistic commitment. The two enemies that will prevent you from relishing the present moment is when you pursue any activity in a mechanical, mindless, mundane, and routine manner or in a chaotic, disorganized, and random manner. Instead, engage each activity as an artist whereby you are "in the zone." When you are "in the zone," all your senses are alive, you are focused, and you use the lessons from your past to engage the moment; you are committed to excellence! In other words, seize the moment with all that you have and all that you are!

These seven steps, namely, relishing in the present moment by being all there, seeing that the ordinary details of life are extraordinary, allowing the present experience to teach you, engage adversity, using your past as resources to engage the present, closely looking for connections in experience, and pursuing every activity with artistic engagement, will help you recover from or prevent anemia that often accompanies success.

The bottom line is that so many of us rush to the finishing line but ignore all the riches that surround the present. Thus, by not "feeding" on the present, integrally relating these riches to our goals, we find ourselves deprived of a great wealth of meaningful experiences, genuine relationships, and deeds of service to those who come in our sphere of influence.

One Last Thought:

I would be amiss on how to recover from or prevent the malnourishment of success without stating three critical truths. First, within us all is the propensity to allow pride, a fasting-acting poison, which moves you to act in the most self-serving ways. Do not allow the poison of pride to take hold of your life or you will discover that success can be very lonely and perhaps, temporal. When an over-inflated ego gains ground, all sorts of other vices develop such as a lack of teachability, jealousy of the success of others, and a failure to appreciate the unique giftedness and skills of others. Deception, fear, and manipulation emerge, teamwork is downplayed, and the abuse of authority becomes commonplace. Enemies grow. Therefore, consistently serve the "least of us" as an equal. They too, are inherently valuable, and they, like you, have also made mistakes. I suspect if you follow this truth, you will discover a certain joy that is found in serving others. Genuine friendships will multiply and significant blessings will come about in the most unexpected ways.

Second, do not build your life around earthly pleasures that might flow from material success. Earthly pleasures are temporal pleasures (e.g., car, home, and money) that are not designed to last. In contrast, spiritual pleasures are satisfactory because they promote intimacy with God (e.g., fear God; keep commandments). Spiritual pleasures allow you to be used by God in ways you may never have imagined, and all for His glory. When we follow hard after God by conforming ourselves to His commandments, precepts, & principles, by means of the Holy Spirit, our lives becomes vibrant & exciting.

And third, do not merely look at your success. Rather, follow your success to the God of the Bible, who is your Creator and your God. He made you! He designed you! He gave you the resources! He allowed your dreams to come true. Now, maximize yourself unto God's glory by embracing the values He holds dear; "pour out" all that God has poured into you!